



Elements Shaping Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The formulation of foreign policy of a country is an excruciatingly complex process. Foreign policy decisions are the result of shaping by multiple influences acting simultaneously or in turns to decide the course of action taken by a country in dealing with the rest of the world. These influences could range from global level factors such as competition among big powers to individual level influences such as the personality traits of the leader in power. This paper is an attempt to shed a light on these multiple elements that play a role in deciding the direction of foreign policy of a country.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Global Factors, Regional Factors, Domestic Influences, Personality Traits.

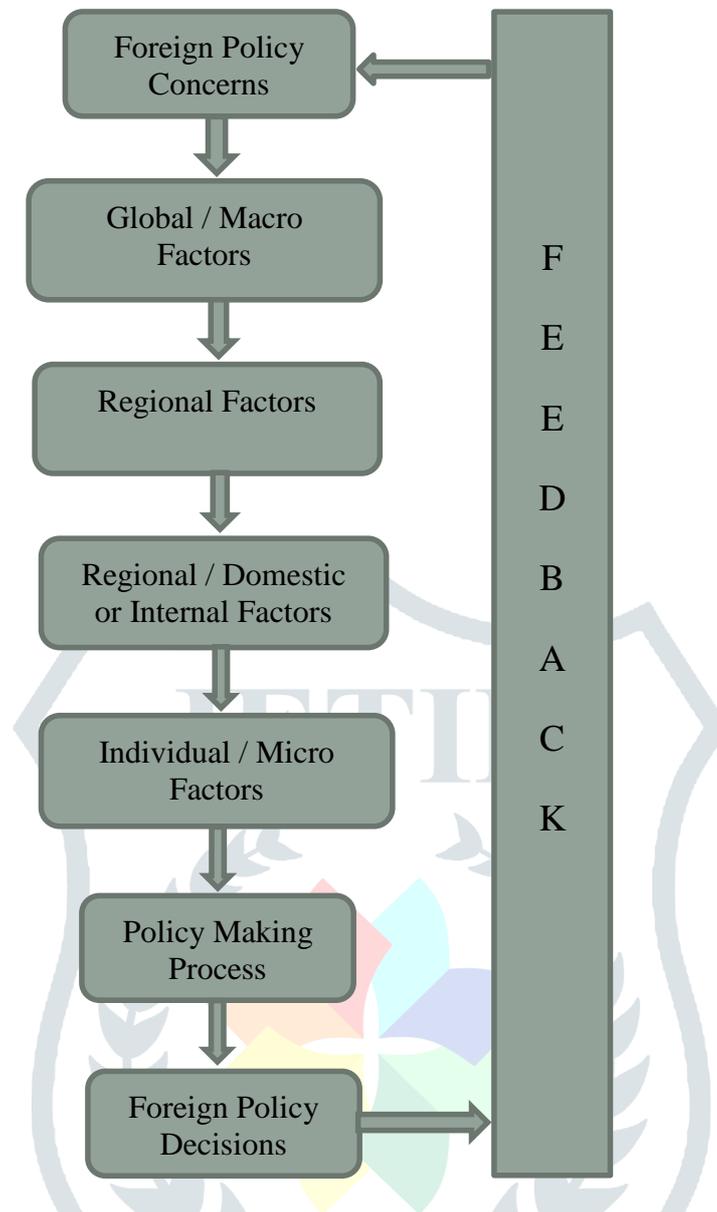
Setting the course of a countries foreign policy is an important endeavor for any government. From dealing with immediate neighbours to interacting with the world that lies beyond, a countries foreign policy can consist of a vast array of activities. Foreign policy matters encompass everything done by its leaders from ensuring the survival of the state to maximizing its well-being in the international system, and everything that falls in between. Any activity falling in this wide spectrum would come under the purview of foreign policy analysis.

How foreign policy gets shaped

For a profound understanding of how a countries foreign policy decisions are arrived at, the elements which shape foreign policy can be grouped into the following levels or categories. One can visualize foreign policy considerations passing through these layers or filters before they take the shape of foreign policy decisions.

- Global / Macro level factors
- Regional level factors
- Domestic or Internal level factors
- Individual / Micro level factors

Collectively, these factors can be seen as operating in levels, wherein each level casts its influence on the molding of the foreign policy decisions of a country. It needs to be underlined that these levels or elements do not influence foreign policy decision making in an even or uniform fashion. The amount of influence which a particular factor has on a foreign policy outcome depends on the nature of the problem or concern at hand. Accordingly, the foreign policy is given shape by the respective policy making apparatus of countries. Further, the feedback received from the foreign policy outcomes would go on to influence the next round of foreign policy decision making on that particular issue and the cycle goes on.



Levels of influence that have a bearing on the shaping of a countries foreign policy decisions.

As pointed out earlier, foreign policy is about how a country engages with the rest of the world for protecting and maximizing its interests and advancing the values it cherishes. Thus, the USA took a decision to attack Afghanistan and uproot the Taliban regime from Kabul in the wake of 9/11 terror attacks to protect itself from further onslaught of terror. Further, the United States advocating the spread of a liberal democratic order complemented by a system of free trade across the world is about spreading the values of democracy, freedom and a free-market economy model, the values that are cherished by its people and its allies. The entire Cold War period can be seen as a clash of conflicting values held by the two superpowers of the time. The Soviet Union was opposed to the western style free market economy and democracy and regarded it as a system based on the exploitation of the working classes. The Soviets believed that the Russian Revolution showed a way to end this exploitation of the working class and had led to the creation of a socialist paradise. In that sense, the Soviet economic and political system was a better way of organizing human life. While the leaders of the Soviet Union thought that the people in the rest of the world deserved an opportunity to replicate this socialist model in their country, the United States was opposed to this expansion of communism and perceived it to be a threat to freedom and democracy. The Cold War ended with the capitalist-democratic order gaining a distinctive edge over the idea of communism. (Haass, 2020: 29)

Global political climate plays a very critical role in the shaping and success of a countries foreign policy agenda. This macro level situation usually determines what policy initiatives are more likely to succeed and which course of actions must be avoided or deferred for the time being. Before advancing its foreign policy agenda, every country must first consider this global political climate. Even if it might want to, and it certainly

has the capability to, the US finds itself constrained in taking any action against the North Korean regime because of the support of China and Russia to Kim's government. Another example would be the restraint and caution displayed by United States and its western allies in stopping the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Further, the US does not agree with the Chinese claims in the South China Sea but finds that its options to do something to stop China are limited. These limitations are imposed not by the military capabilities of USA but by the changing global scenario represented by a rising China and an assertive Russia under the leadership of Putin.

Countries primarily fashion their foreign policy in the context of the prevailing global political situation. They are basically responding to the current alignment of the global political factors for protecting or advancing their interests. Coming back to the example of the Cold War, which started right after the end of the Second World War, USA adopting a policy of containment of communism was aimed at preventing Soviet Union from bringing more countries under the communist umbrella. Thus, 'containment' was a foreign policy posture adopted by USA in response to the threats perceived by its foreign policy makers to its security and way of life, springing from the spreading of communism. (Ambrose & Brinkley, 2011: 75)

To elaborate further, 'Non-Alignment' was a foreign policy response of newly independent countries like India, to save themselves from getting entangled in the power competition between the two superpowers. They felt that getting involved on either side in this power rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union is likely to jeopardies their hard fought independence and would also divert them from their goal of rapid economic development to bring their people out of crushing poverty. Here also, global level developments can be seen as eliciting a certain foreign policy response from various countries. (Dixit, 1998: 32)

Further, different countries respond differently to the same developments in the global political equations. While India chose non-alignment as a foreign policy response to advance its interests in the ongoing political competition between the USA and the USSR, Pakistan which was in similar circumstances as India chose to align with USA. This happens because of the choice made by foreign policy makers as to which set of interests they want to protect. What is the priority of a country at that point in time. Pakistan perceived India as the biggest threat to its very survival and existence and so decided to align with USA for reducing its power asymmetry with India. Here, Pakistan placed improvement of chances of survival above the prospects of economic development or the independence to decide its foreign policy path, which non-alignment promised to protect.

A countries foreign policy and its perception of where its interests are, are also determined to a great extent by where it is located globally. There are two aspects to a country's location. First is the geographical location which determines a lot in terms of what a country can do and cannot do. This includes the strategic importance of the location, endowment of resources, a country's neighbours, access to sea and such other factors critical in deciding a countries capability to defend its interests. The USA being separated from the rest of the world by the Atlantic and Pacific oceans provided it with a natural barrier that insulated it from the turmoil in the rest of the world. It was this geographical barrier which made it possible for USA to pursue a policy of isolationism and provided it with the space to develop its power capabilities without any hindrances and entanglements. At the time of the start of the First World War, USA was on an equal footing with the major European powers and in the course of the two world wars, not a single bomb was dropped on the mainland of USA. All this was made possible by the geographical advantages provided by the location of USA.

A second aspect of location is the position which a country occupies in the global power matrix. This position also plays a critical role in determining the foreign policy choices made by a country. In the pre First World War world, and right up to the end of Second World War, Britain being a global power had a different set of goals in comparison to USA which was yet to arrive as a major global power. The outlook and goals of Great Britain were global in nature in accordance with the maxim, 'the sun never sets in the British Empire.' Britain was a global power in that era and its foreign policy efforts were directed at continuing this British domination of world politics. In comparison, USA followed a policy of isolationism, that was primarily based on minimum involvement in the affairs of European powers. These choices are altered in the post Second World War world where now USA was a major global power and Britain was a mere shadow of its former glorious self. While USA now pursued a policy of globalism, UK was reduced to toeing the line opted for by the United States. (Ambrose & Brinkley, 2011: xi)

Not only this, foreign policy is also shaped by where a country wants to go from where it is presently located in the power matrix. The First World War revealed to the world the arrival of USA as a major world power. Instead of consolidating its position in the rearranged global power matrix, the USA chose to return to isolationism after its victory in the First World War. While President Wilson comprehended the role US could play in contributing to a stable and peaceful world after the end of First World War, a majority of the American leadership did not agree with this assessment and the US did not join the League of Nations that it had worked to create. In a total contrast to what it did at the end of the First World War, the USA decided to discard its earlier choice of isolationism and embraced globalism after its victory in the Second World War. Now the assessment of US foreign policy makers was that the United States had interests spread across the globe and it would require active US involvement to protect and advance them.

Apart from the critical influence of global level factors, regional and domestic level factors also have a significant impact on the shaping of foreign policy of a country. Thus, Pakistan's decision-making and foreign policy choices are determined more by what is happening in South Asia and by its desire to seek parity with India, rather than what is happening in the rest of the world. Pakistan cultivating a relationship with USA and China is a clear reflection of its regional priorities dictating its foreign policy posture. (Hiro, 2015) In the Middle East, during the Cold War, both Saudi Arabia and Israel were allies of USA against the Soviet threat but at the regional level, they were sworn enemies. The situation, however, has gone a sea change of late with the threat of Iran becoming more and more potent. The two sworn enemies are now moving in the direction of cultivating a closer relationship to deal with the common enemy that is Iran. (Haass, 2020: 111)

Domestic factors also play a strong hand in the shaping of foreign policy of a country. Due to the prevailing climate of mutual hostility between India and Pakistan, it would be almost impossible for any of the sides to make any significant concessions for resolving the problems which they are facing amongst themselves. Any side which is seen as conceding too much in the negotiations would risk the damaging prospect of losing support among its countrymen. This may even result in the government of the day being voted out of power in India, or in case of Pakistan, the army taking over the reins of power from the civilian administration. In another example, Margaret Thatcher started the Falklands War with Argentina in an attempt to divert attention from the flak her government was receiving for economic troubles at home. In 1962, Mao is believed to have launched the war with India in a bid to boost his and the Communist Party's sagging popularity in China. Even after all these years, nationalism continues to be a very potent drug and there is still nothing like a good old war to rally around the people of a country. In the high induced by nationalistic fervor, all other problems are swept under the carpet and forgotten about at least for the time being. In this age of mass media and instant news, governments are all the more compelled to play to their domestic galleries in making their foreign policy choices.

Cultural memory and collective consciousness of the people of a country also play a significant role in shaping its foreign policy. Thus, the foreign policy orientation of India is more likely to be influenced by ideas of Kautilya and Ashoka. Further, epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata and the lessons from history also play an important part in shaping the consciousness of India's leaders and foreign policy architects. (Dixit, 1998: 25) Similarly, foreign policy outcomes in China are more likely to bear a stamp of thinkers like Confucius and Tao. Also, the 'Middle Kingdom' complex of China is derived from its historical experiences and has an important part to play in the present day aggressive foreign policy stance of China.

The last factor which is crucial in shaping foreign policy outcomes is the personality of the individuals who are occupying the position of decision makers on matters of foreign policy. If Germany were to be headed by someone else in place of Hitler, may be Germany would not have pursued the kind of policies which ultimately lead to the Second World War. Hitler's aggression, his belief in expanding the German frontiers as being necessary for the well-being of Germans, his ideas on race, his ability to convince the people of Germany to stand behind his foreign policy choices, all went in, in taking the world in the direction of the Second World War. In another big if, the untimely demise of US President FD Roosevelt broke down the triad of leadership which had successfully won the Second World War against the Fascist forces. If Roosevelt had lived, it's possible that the excellent chemistry between him and Stalin could have avoided the two countries going in the direction of the Cold War.

While all these factors operating at different levels are crucial in shaping of foreign policy of a country, most foreign policy decisions and outcomes are a result of multiple factors working at various levels

simultaneously. While Hitler's personality was one factor, and maybe the most significant one, in pushing the world towards the Second World War, we cannot ignore the contribution of other factors such as the nature of the peace settlement of 1919, the great depression of 1929, the policy of appeasement of Germany that was adhered to by Britain and France, among others, for causing the Second World War. In view of this, a multilevel analysis is always a better choice for arriving at a more comprehensive understanding of foreign policy choices made by countries.

It also needs to be underlined that the task of identifying the interests of a country and adjusting the course of its foreign policy is a continuous process. Every country's foreign Policy making apparatus has to work without any pause for advancing the interests of their country by converting inputs received from multiple sources into foreign policy decisions. Apart from the shifting contours of interests, another significant input in shaping foreign policy is the feedback received from impact of earlier decisions. This feedback plays an important role in finetuning the foreign policy in accordance with the change in time and circumstances. Thus, the lessons from the Cuban Missile crisis play an important part in cooling down the heat of the Cold War in the years that followed.

Conclusion

The formulation of foreign policy of a country does not take place in a vacuum. There is nothing like a clean slate from where you start writing a fresh story. The architects of a country's foreign policy get influenced by what lies in the past. This gets combined with an interplay of global level, regional level and individual level variables. These cultural and historical influences run deep in the sub conscious mind of the policy-makers and can be discerned by analysing and evaluating their foreign policy choices. So any understanding of foreign policy choice made by a country is not going to be complete unless it explores all the factors that might have had a role in influencing the policy making process.

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